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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014  
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SUBJECT: UNDP PRIMARY PREVIEW

REF: SEOUL 3018

Classified By: A/POL David Wolff. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: Though the race for the United New Democratic Party (UNDP) candidacy is tightening and allegations of voter fraud persist, former Unification Minister Chung Dong-young is in the lead and could be the UNDP candidate if his strong national organization can get out the vote and hold off Sohn Hak-kyu in the final round of voting on October 14. Whoever wins, the voter malaise that has defined the UNDP primary continues and is unlikely to dissipate even after a candidate is selected October 15. If the UNDP candidate does not receive much popular support, independent candidate Moon Kuk-hyun could emerge as the unified liberal candidate. Chung, Moon, Sohn or Lee Hae-chan -- whoever emerges has their work cut out if they hope to compete with GNP candidate Lee Myung-bak. End Summary

12. (C) On October 11, Sohn Hak-kyu won a second round of mobile phone voting in the United New Democratic Party (UNDP) presidential primary, closing the gap between Sohn and front runner Chung Dong-young to roughly 10,000 votes (NOTE: The electorate is made up of 2.2 million voters including mobile phone voters, party members, and phone poll results. About 50 percent of the votes have been cast. END NOTE.) The UNDP will hold the remaining primaries simultaneously on October 14 with a final round of mobile phone voting from October 12-14 and the phone poll, weighted as 10 percent of the vote on October 14.

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SUNDAY'S IMPACT  
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13. (C) Eight areas - Daejeon, South Choongcheong, North Jeolla, Gyeonggi, Incheon, Daegu, North Gyeongsang, and Seoul -- will vote in one, simultaneous "one-shot" primary Sunday, October 14. Chung Dong-young has a comfortable margin in the eight areas that have already voted. Former Gyeonggi Governor Sohn Hak-kyu has made some surprising gains in the mobile phone votes, and additionally the October 14 primary includes some conservative strongholds that may favor Sohn. However, Sohn's failure to win any of the eight local votes -- including typically conservative Busan -- suggest he will have difficulty winning where it counts, at the voting booth.

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VOTER TURNOUT  
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14. (C) The UNDP vastly overestimated their ability to create momentum through their rolling primaries, and their decision to hold a "one-shot" primary on October 14 has failed to generate much public interest. In the eight regional primaries already conducted, voter turnout has averaged a paltry 19 percent, underscoring the public's deep ambivalence towards the liberal candidates (Reftel). In 2002 an exciting rolling primary vaulted Roh Moo-hyun on to the national stage, and voter turnout was over 70 percent. Mobile phone voting turnout has been significantly higher than at the voting booths -- turnout on October 12 was 74.9 percent and 70.6 percent in the previous round. On October 12, Cho Beckhee, a Chung foreign policy adviser, told poloffs that the tightening race might help spark voter turnout this Sunday, but that they would still have to call registered voters to remind them to get out and vote.

15. (C) Meanwhile, investigations continue into allegations that Chung advisers illegally registered voters and many complain that Chung illegally used buses to get voters to the polling stations. Sohn's wins in the phone vote was probably more a reflection of differences in voter mobilization efforts rather than a reflection of voter disenchantment with Chung. Lee Yun-saeng, a close Sohn adviser, told poloff that Sohn focused heavily on mobile phone voter registration since he realized he could not compete with Chung's grassroots network getting voters to the booth. Chung's advisor Cho told poloffs that Sohn's wins in the phone votes had been "a shock," but postulated that Lee Hae-chan's and Sohn's allegations of Chung's wrongdoing were starting to backfire and affect their popularity. Certainly the squabbling about voter fraud and the decision to delay the primaries only served to highlight the progressives' fractious state.

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PARTY COHESIVENESS  
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16. (C) Election staff members anticipate having the tentative primary results on the evening of October 14, but the UNDP will not make the formal announcement until 4:00pm on October 15. Embassy contacts have suggested that the losing candidates will accept the election's outcome, though concerns about voter fraud will likely persist, especially if Chung wins. Nevertheless, the other two candidates stand to gain little by refusing to unite behind the winner. Prominent political commentator Kang Won-taek pointed out that the GNP primary served as a good role model for the UNDP in that by gracefully conceding defeat, Park Geun-hye was able to survive politically and maybe even increase her influence in the party. By contrast, in 1997 Rhee In-je precipitated his own downfall by setting up his own party after losing the primary to Lee Hoi-chang. Kang said that refusal to concede would be a political disaster to the losing UNDP candidate and the entire liberal camp.

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COMMENT  
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17. (C) If President Roh and former President Kim Dae-jung hope to see another liberal president, they and other liberal politicians must unite effectively and use the remaining nine weeks to present a vision for Korea that will mobilize traditional liberal supporters, many of whom have tuned out. There is still a lot of politics left -- Moon Kuk-hyun or other independent candidates could steal the spotlight from the UNDP candidate and revelations about Lee could emerge and grab the public's attention.

18. (C) Realistically, the winner of the UNDP primary will likely unite other non-GNP candidates under the UNDP banner. Then, the task will be to attempt to chip away at Lee's popularity through negative campaigning and build their popularity. For now, these tasks appear daunting if not impossible.

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